

VZCZCXRO0513
PP RUEHDBU
DE RUEHAH #1003/01 2691151
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 261151Z SEP 06
FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7837
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ASHGABAT 001003

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (PERRY)
DEPT PLEASE PASS TO PEACE CORPS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/20/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TX](#)
SUBJECT: PEACE CORPS IN TURKMENISTAN - EVERY MOVE YOU MAKE,
WE'LL BE WATCHING YOU

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Jennifer L. Brush for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary and Comment

11. (C) Among other observations, both Deputy Chairman Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov and Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov complained to visiting Peace Corps Director Jay Katzen during September 20-21 meetings that Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) failed to gain "approvals" for their secondary activities. During site visits and other conversations, several PCVs complained they were demoralized by the government's obsession with controlling their every movement. "I can't take the kids out to play baseball on a nice day because I don't have prior approval," one volunteer said. Katzen also raised with Berdimukhammedov and Meredov possible expansion of Peace Corps in Turkmenistan, including more volunteers and new programs such as curriculum development and health teaching in the schools. In response to Katzen's request for more direct and faster access to Ministry of Education officials to secure approvals in advance and also to vet Peace Corps activities, Berdimukhammedov pointed to Minister of Education, Shemshat Annagylyjova, who was sitting in on the meeting and said, "you can call her directly." Answering Katzen's question about his "vision" for Turkmenistan, Berdimukhammedov said, "we will be prosperous, happy and healthy because we are lucky to have Saparmyrat Niyazov as our president." After inviting Katzen to Turkmenistan's 15th anniversary celebrations, Berdimukhammedov added, "the only example I need to give you or our leader's greatness is the recent deal struck with Gazprom for our gas, that says it all." Both Berdimukhammedov and Meredov said they spoke for the president when they expressed their appreciation for Peace Corps.

12. (C) Comment: Volunteers frequently express their frustration that the government does so little to care for its own people and finds so many ways to prevent them from carrying out their mission. Katzen's visit was a very welcome morale-booster for the PCVs as well as a welcome reminder to the Government of Turkmenistan that the USG takes its treatment of the volunteers seriously. Berdimukhammedov's comment about the Gazprom deal is illustrative of the head-in-the-sand attitude government officials have to take to survive. The deal has Gazprom paying Turkmenistan less than half the going market price but will provide additional revenue to Niyazov's massive vanity construction projects, while the living standard continues to deteriorate. Peace Corps Volunteers are so popular throughout Turkmenistan precisely because they represent an alternative vision. End Comment.

Meeting Finally Goes Forward at Last

13. (C) Following days of efforts to pin down meetings for Katzen with Turkmenistan's Foreign Minister and Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers responsible for education issues, during which the Charge at one point had to threaten to call off the visit, the Foreign Minister finally agreed to meet with Peace Corps Regional Director Katzen. The September 20 meeting, which lasted approximately 80 minutes, was pleasant, with Meredov frequently reiterating President Niyazov's -- and Turkmenistan's -- wish to further develop cooperation with the Peace Corps. Remarking that President Niyazov usually mentions the positive role of the Peace Corps in any meetings with the embassy or U.S. Government visitors, Meredov noted the many achievements of the Peace Corps during the years of "cooperation" between Turkmenistan and the Corps. On the one hand, Peace Corps volunteers had helped teach young people English and promoted health care, particularly in rural areas; on the other, volunteers had learned the culture and traditions of Turkmenistan's people. Meredov hoped that the meeting would further enhance cooperation.

VSAT Internet Satellite Dish: Installation to Go Forward
"Soon"

14. (C) Asking Meredov to convey to President Niyazov U.S. appreciation for the president's many positive words about the Peace Corps, Katzen said he wanted to thank Meredov for what he suspected was in the folder the Foreign Minister was carrying -- a final agreement on the VSAT Internet satellite dish which the Peace Corps had been seeking to install for two years. A startled Meredov stated, "Not yet." He went on

ASHGABAT 00001003 002 OF 004

to explain that, though the authorities had no objection to the VSAT, the proposal was still undergoing a technical review at the Ministry of Communications, which would assign a frequency "soon."

Turkmenistan Not Ready for More Volunteers

15. (C) Katzen suggested that, since the VSAT issue was almost resolved, the Peace Corps wanted to respond to Turkmenistan's sign of good faith with one of its own: an increase in the number of volunteers sent to Turkmenistan corresponding to Turkmenistan's own expressed wish of increasing English language and health training in its schools. Peace Corps wanted to help Turkmenistan develop an effective and modern teaching curriculum in English, and to start teaching young children the basics of good hygiene and health. Meredov promised to consider Katzen's proposal for new cooperation in teaching English and health and suggested that the Regional Director discuss specifics further the next day in a meeting with the Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers responsible for education, Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov. However, he added, while the people of Turkmenistan were hospitable, the country was not yet ready to deal with the new logistical challenges posed by more volunteers. In any case, he concluded, the quality of cooperation was unrelated to the number of volunteers. Noting the success of some volunteers in developing a "pictionary" (i.e., a pictorial dictionary), Meredov said that it was initiatives like this that made the Peace Corps program so successful.

Improving the Approval Process: MFA to Promote "More Active Contacts" with MOE

16. (C) Responding to the approval problems which last summer had led to only 4 of 13 Peace Corps summer leadership camps going forward, Katzen invited Meredov to visit the camps next summer so that he could see for himself how valuable they

were for Turkmenistan's youth. Noting that he wanted all involved to feel more comfortable about the camps, Katzen also stressed the importance of beginning the approval process earlier this year in order to avoid a last-minute rush. In addition, Katzen remarked, many volunteers were finding Turkmenistan's approval requirement for in-country travel frustrating, since they often received approvals very late. This, in turn, meant that they arrived late, depriving the students of valuable teaching time.

¶7. (C) Noting that these two problems, in fact, both touched on the same issue, Meredov suggested that the Peace Corps should start the planning meetings with Turkmenistan's authorities earlier. The Charge pointed out, however, that, in seeking the meetings it needed, the Peace Corps faced a disconnect: the Ministry of Education -- the action ministry on most Peace Corps activities -- usually told Peace Corps to go through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs told Peace Corps to go directly to the Ministry of Education. There needed to be a better system, she concluded. Acknowledging the problem, Meredov promised to promote "more active contacts" between the Peace Corps and the Ministry of Education.

¶8. (C) Meredov justified the travel notification requirement as an effort to protect foreigners in restricted areas and denied that volunteers faced any problems in gaining permission to travel, as long as they submitted their approval requests well in advance. Although Turkmenistan was basically a safe country, it had long borders with Iran and Afghanistan, and there had been cases where foreigners in border areas had found themselves in trouble. It was necessary, according to Meredov, to submit the requests early so that the police in these areas could respond. Agreeing that personal safety was important, Katzen thanked the authorities for handling security situations involving volunteers when they occurred.

Meredov: Volunteers Shouldn't Go Outside Limits

¶9. (C) Meredov also noted what he considered a PCV inclination to "overstep the bounds" of the Peace Corps mission. (Note: Meredov was referring to the PCV secondary activities. End Note.) For example, he said, one volunteer English teacher had started offering students outside instruction in Tae Kwon Do. "The Peace Corps is a peaceful organization, so it should teach peaceful things," Meredov said, adding that "we have our own martial arts programs."

ASHGABAT 00001003 003 OF 004

Nonetheless, he said, if the authorities knew in advance of PCV secondary activities, "they probably would be approved."

A Nearly Missed Meeting Gets Underway

¶10. (C) After similar difficulties to scheduling the MFA meeting and a delay until the following day, the meeting with Deputy Chairman Berdimukhammedov was nearly scrapped when security personnel at the Council of Ministers complex wanted to deny Charge access, despite her previous visits. Following a clarification from above, security personnel allowed the entire delegation to enter, ultimately resulting in a 15-minute delay. Once all participants were present, the meeting proceeded in a friendly, cordial atmosphere.

¶11. (C) Berdimukhammedov greatly praised the work of PCVs in Turkmenistan and demonstrated a strong familiarity with the numbers of volunteers working in either education or health. Similarly, he noted President Niyazov's great interest and appreciation of Peace Corps' work. However, Berdimukhammedov stressed that the singular problem with Peace Corps work in Turkmenistan is that volunteers' activities did not always include their counterparts. Though Berdimukhammedov stressed

that this was to assure people working on the same problem were cooperating, he made it clear the government wanted to pre-approve all Peace Corps activities. (Note: One PCV has complained that even holding a "pick-up game of baseball" because of nice weather could not be done without prior approval, although the same volunteer added that she "would not trade her time in Turkmenistan for anything." End Note.)

In contrast to Meredov, Berdimukhammedov welcomed an increase in PCVs and good-naturedly said he had been "offended" when numbers had dropped in recent years.

Responses: Some Good and Some Bad

¶12. (C) Katzen stressed the need for adequate communication in Peace Corps affairs and requested guidance on how this might be facilitated. Pointing to his Minister of Education and Deputy Minister of Health sitting at the table, Berdimukhammedov said, "call them directly; we prefer everything in writing but you can call them." (Comment: This is a bit of a surprise because in the past the government has insisted that all contact with government officials go through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by diplomatic note. End Comment.)

¶13. (C) Katzen offered for consideration additional PC support for training of English teachers and health programs. Berdimukhammedov stated that the country already had teachers, but they might like help with lesson plans. After stressing a common concern for healthcare and the health of citizens of their respective countries, Katzen asked about school access for PCVs working on health projects. In a misrepresentation of reality, Berdimukhammedov described with some detail how health programs have already been conducted in schools. However, when Charge D, Affaires raised a two-year-old dipnote request for health PCVs to have access to schools, both Berdimukhammedov and the Minister of Health claimed to know nothing about it and only suggested that it was not sent on from MFA. (Comment: The usual excuse. End Comment.)

We're Blessed

¶14. (C) In response to Katzen's drawing him out on his vision of the future of Turkmenistan, Berdimukhammedov spoke at length about the greatness of the president and the prosperity, happiness and health he had brought to the people of Turkmenistan. "Let me give you the best example," Berdimukhammedov said, "look at the brilliant deal our president just cut with Gazprom. I don't even need to explain to you the brilliance of that deal." According to Berdimukhammedov, "we are blessed to have a president who worries about his people night and day."

We Have Enough Internet

¶15. (C) At the end of the meeting, Charge inquired about the government's apparent reversal in approving the Global Connections and Exchange program (GCE). Despite informal approval by the Ministry of Education, a diplomatic note from the previous day declared that the program was unnecessary because of a similar NATO project, "The Silk Road Project,"

ASHGABAT 00001003 004 OF 004

to provide internet access in schools and therefore would not be approved. The Charge stressed that this was a program which did not cost Turkmenistan anything and was also a type of exchange for teachers and students and therefore not an identical program. She offered to review the program with the Minister of Education and Berdimukhammedov agreed, but stressed that Turkmenistan would not approve redundant programs.

PCVs Frustrated

¶16. (C) During a September 20 dinner, PC Health volunteers expressed their frustration at the government's efforts to monitor and approve their every move. Some volunteers also noted that it was demoralizing to work in a country that had the resources and manpower to solve its social problems and that one man was able to block all progress. Katzen promised to work on improving the pre-staging briefing process. Charge and Katzen told the PCVs how important their work was to the U.S. Mission here and told them their impact was dramatic, though they all may not be able to see it immediately.

Comment

¶17. (C) The Meredov/Berdimukhammedov - PCV agreement on the fact that there's a problem conducting secondary programs sums up the challenges of operating in Turkmenistan. Despite the government's praise and support for Peace Corps' work in Turkmenistan, all levels of volunteers' work are monitored and controlled to a degree that frustrates even the simplest activities. Katzen's visit did much both to lift PCV spirits and to let the government know its overzealous control is unhelpful. At the same time, volunteers with whom Katzen met said they were having the most meaningful jobs, and were making an impact. Embassy and Katzen agree that Peace Corps is our most significant people-to-people program here and that, whatever the vicissitudes, the value of Peace Corps' initiatives and the appreciation here of the volunteers' presence validate the importance of having Peace Corps in Turkmenistan. End Comment.

BRUSH